

# When Teachers Should Refer Students to a Mental Health Professional

*National Mental Health Information Center*

## How can you tell if a student needs a referral to a mental health professional?

There is a wide range of normal reactions to a disaster. Usually the reactions can be dealt with through support at home and at school. However, when symptoms persist several months and/or are disruptive to the student's social, mental or physical functioning, you may need to recommend professional help. Counseling may be recommended as a preventive measure.

## How should the referral be made?

In making such referral, it is important to stress that it is not a sign of failure from parents if they find they are not able to help their child by themselves. It is also important to note that early action will help the child return to normal and to avoid more severe problems later.

## When should a referral be made for a preschool or elementary school student?

Consider referring the family for professional help if the child:

- Seems excessively withdrawn and depressed
- Does not respond to special attention and attempts to draw him/her out
- Exhibits extreme signs of anxiety, such as excessive clinging, irritability, eating or sleeping problems for more than one month.

## When should a referral be made for a junior high or high school student?

Consider referral to a mental health professional if the student:

- Is disoriented, that is, if he/she is unable to give own name, town and the date
- Complains of significant memory gaps
- Is despondent and shows agitation, restlessness and pacing
- Is severely depressed and withdrawn
- Mutilates self
- Uses drugs or alcohol excessively
- Is unable to care for self, e.g., doesn't eat, drink, bath or change clothes
- Repeats ritualistic acts
- Hallucinates, hears voices, sees visions
- States his/body feels "unreal" and expresses fears that he/she is "going crazy"
- Excessively preoccupied with one idea or thought
- Has a delusion that someone or something is out to get him and his family
- Is afraid he will kill self or another
- Is unable to make simple decisions or carry out everyday functions
- Shows extreme pressure of speech, talk overflows

**For more information** on responding to mental health needs in times of crises, or to find out about local mental health services, contact 1-800-789-2647, or visit [www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov) (click on "crisis counseling").

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